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Editorial Introduction

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Editorial Introduction

by Gordon Wells

This issue of *Networks* has two major themes: teacher preparation, and approaches to teaching math, literature and writing in the school classroom.

In the first article, Frank Brathwaite and Brad Porfilio report on an attempt to help preservice teachers become more aware of, and sensitive to, ways in which unjust educational practices inhibit the educational performance of marginalized students. As part of an intensive course, they arranged for a group of White preservice teachers to be paired with urban elementary students in a tutoring role every day for two weeks. Following this assignment, the teacher candidates reflected on their experiences in written papers and in shared dialogues. In reporting their findings, the authors quote from the teacher candidates' writings and oral contributions to show the extent to which the experience of working with an individual urban student led some of them to gain some insight into the issues that teachers and students face in urban schools. At the same time, they recognize the inadequacy of this brief experience in enabling White, mainly middle class suburban young people to develop a nuanced understanding, based on lived experience, of the complex issues facing urban schools. They conclude by considering the changes they hope to make in future offerings of the program.

In *Mentoring the mentor*, Patricia Norman describes and reflects on her experience of acting as the university mentor to a group of preservice teachers during their teaching practicum. Starting with the discovery that she seemed to allow her own ideas about good practice to impede her responsive listening to one of the teacher candidates, she goes on to recount how, in a class that she took herself, she was helped to find ways to become more attentive to the teacher candidate's intended meanings and to explore the issues raised by the lessons she had observed in a more collaborative and constructive manner. Through her thoughtful reflections, Norman presents a compelling example of the value of working in the zone of proximal development as both advisor and advisee. In so doing, she admirably illustrates Tharp and Gallimore's (1988) argument that such assistance is necessary at every level in the enterprise of learning and teaching.

Gary Davis and Mercedes McGowen also present a case study related to the education of preservice teachers. Unlike the preceding articles, however, this one is very precisely focused on the development of one particular student in their mathematics methods course for pre-service elementary teachers. At one level, this article illustrates very clearly the value of engaging students in a variety of tasks constructed around a particular mathematical concept. As the title of the article suggests, this led to *A rush of connections and insights*. But at another level, this article is also an example of the importance of productive long-term memory for mathematics. The tasks in which the students engaged created a series of "memorable episodes" that enabled the case study student to make connections between mathematical concepts that she had previously believed herself incapable of remembering. As well as being extremely interesting in its own right, this article prompts the question whether such an approach might be equally successful in relation to other areas of the curriculum.

Math is also the focus of Michelle Pasko's article, which explores the use of literature for children to enhance students' interest in and motivation for learning mathematics. Already persuaded of the value of integrating math and language arts, Pasko set out to investigate not only how her third grade students made math connections in response to literature, but also whether they would make them accurately. Based on journal entries during a three week period, in which the students were encouraged to look for "math connections" in their reading, Pasko found that many connections were made but that not all of them were accurate. However, once started, the habit of noticing connections persisted and the students' enthusiasm for math increased. Pasko concludes her article by reflecting on what she herself gained from this worthwhile investigation.

The final article, by Karen Keller, explores the value of writing with the support of a peer group. Having experienced the benefits of working in such a group herself as a graduate student, she decided to investigate how the students in her 9th Grade Composition / Literature Honors class would take to this practice. Over the course of one school year, she collected data on a variety of writing assignments arising from their reading of works by Twain, O'Henry and Shakespeare, both the written texts and the students' feedback on their experience of working on these assignments in their groups. In her article, she provides evidence drawn both these data sources and from her own observations of the groups' manner of working together. Perhaps not unexpectedly, she concludes by expressing her conviction that writing groups are indeed beneficial for high school writers and by stating her intention to continue to explore how they can best support her students' development as writers.

This issue of *Networks* also contains a review of Kelleen Toohey's: *Learning English at School: Identity, Social Relations and Classroom Practice* by Beth Anne Cherry, Renee Ford, and Kathy Mueller.

In concluding this issue, I have, unusually, taken the liberty of including an article by myself. I was invited to speak at the annual institute of The Learning Network in Westminster, Colorado this summer on the arguments for teachers becoming teacher researchers. To provide some background for those who wanted to go into the subject more deeply, I prepared a paper based on my contributions to *Action, Talk and Text: Learning and Teaching through Inquiry* (Wells (Ed.) 2001, Teachers College Press). The creation of Communities of Inquiry - among teacher researchers as well as in the classroom - can develop in many ways, of course, and I do not wish to make any special claims for the approach adopted by my colleagues in the Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP). However, I hope some readers may find it useful to see how our particular approach both grew out of the work of Vygotsky and other cultural historical writers and led us to a deeper understanding of the value of that theoretical framework for thinking about the relationship between research and practice in education. (The book as a whole was reviewed in *Networks*, 6 (1).)